Vasudevan et al., 2021

Volume 7 Issue 2, pp. 48-63

Received: 24th March 2021

Revised: 10th April 2021, 9th July 2021

Accepted: 13th July 2021

Date of Publication: 6th October 2021

DOI- https://doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2021.72.4863

This paper can be cited as Vasudevan, A., Sivakumar, M. & Balakrishnan, R. (2021). The Impact of Working from Home on Employee Productivity during 21st Century. PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences, 7 (2), 48-63.

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THE IMPACT OF WORKING FROM HOME ON EMPLOYEE PRODUCTIVITY DURING 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

Companies are now being forced to shift operations out of the workplace and into their employees' homes while doubts are still being cast if productivity would remain. When working from home, the factors influencing productivity have been put under the spotlight to see if they are significant as times call for work from home arrangements to be the subsequent new norm. The research was conducted to investigate the impact of working from home on employee productivity in the 21st

century. The study has thoroughly examined academic papers and theories relevant to the area and settled on using Self-Determination Theory for this research. Self-Determination Theory speaks of the factors that affect an individual's motivation and breaks what drives them into three basic human needs that need to be satisfied to feel motivated. This research's primary data collection method was to use a well-structured questionnaire, and Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 26 was employed. The questionnaire was distributed to several different service industry organizations in Malaysia. The results determined that Autonomy had the highest Correlation and strongest determinant of employee productivity and proved to influence employee productivity alongside competence significantly.

Keywords

Employee Productivity, Working from Home (WFH), 21st Century, Movement Control Order (MCO). Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

1. Introduction

Working from Home (WFH), also known in some countries as telecommuting, is when employees of a company work from outside an office, usually in this instance, home. However, WFH means the ability to work from home and wherever the employee could be comfortable with, for example, libraries, coffee shops, or other spaces (Doyle, 2020). The employees can work and communicate with their employers and co-workers using a myriad of different methods, which include email, mobile chatting applications, video conferencing applications, and even cloud-based systems, which means that they need to travel to an office is removed from the equation. WFH at this juncture of time, if looked at closely, has become such an important way of working and being productive because people are not allowed to go out of their homes and stick to social distancing measures with the Movement Control Order (MCO) being put in place by the Malaysian Government.

In Malaysia, WFH was a privilege that a few companies were only practicing before the Covid-19 pandemic was cast into light. However, with the MCO in place, the Government made it mandatory that all non-essential businesses would have to close their offices to adhere to social distancing guidelines. This brought the need for Malaysian companies to start operating through WFH, be it fully or partially. However, the transition to doing that was different for everyone because only those who were used to working with cloud-based systems and had the technology to do so made it look easy to transition. However, those who were never well-versed in such practices found it

challenging to adjust to the shift in work method and even resisted doing so because they found it troublesome rather than making life easy (NST, 2020).

Companies are reluctant to shift because of the high costs required to integrate all the necessary technology needed to WFH and find that to be a deal-breaker. However, there are other reasons why a company is not comfortable allowing their employees to WFH without having the absolute necessity to do so. One of them is that they do not trust their employees because they think that employees will waste time and not do what they must do because they are unsupervised (Krishnan and Kalra, 2017). Another major reason is that the more traditional companies have managers who are much more old school, and they believe only in following the methods that they are very much used to by declining to accept any form of modernization in the workplace (Harding, 2018).

Companies locally still do not understand the benefits that WFH would bring upon their organization itself. Having employees work from home means companies can save money wherever it is possible. Most importantly, saving money on office space and their associated costs. In the US; companies can save up to \$10,000 per employee if they WFH (Johnson, 2020). Companies can save costs because they must only host fewer employees in their office per day, meaning significant cost savings in utilities, printing, and snacks. This is said to be before the companies consider how much of a productivity bump employees will show when working from home, bringing more cost benefits to the company itself without a doubt (Chin and Yusoff, 2017).

1.1 Research Problem

One of the major issues that exist currently in such a troubled time is the fact that the costs of land and utilities in Malaysia, at least, are on an evident rise, and that does not seem to be slowing down (Hung, 2020). Both the residential and office sectors are having a challenging time since the industrial sector is facing a slowdown temporarily, leading to many companies adopting the wait-and-see situation to see how things turn out for them (Khoo and Chung, 2020). There are so many office buildings that have been completed just around the Kuala Lumpur district where only half of the 8 million sq. ft. is expected to be filled since there is an evident supply overflow when the demand has been prolonged as prices are not affordable to some organizations (Cheah, Teoh, Kenny and Lee, 2015). This situation sheds some light on the reality of why offices should be a thing of the past, and WFH practices are made to be the new norms in society.

Currently, 83% of companies in Malaysia seem to agree upon not laying off their employees but are looking to cut costs elsewhere, namely through reducing or delaying bonuses, canceling

increments, and the suspensions of any promotions just so they can manage their costs and keep it at a bare minimum wherever it is possible (Bernama, 2020). This would inevitably bring up how long companies can survive while keeping that practice up and when it will all go down south until the extent that they would have to lay employees off to survive permanently.

Malaysia is currently going through the worst economic recession that the country has faced in its history. Its effect includes significant plunges in the nation's gross domestic product (GDP), which have caused a sharp rise in unemployment (Landau, 2020). The Malaysian Social Security Organization (Socso) reported that just in the first quarter of 2020, Malaysia's job loss figure has increased by up to 42%. The trend is expected to see a sharp increase from April onward (Perkeso, 2020). One in five Malaysians was said to have been retrenched in early 2020 as companies are looking to survive the harsh economic climate that has plundered the country badly (Choong, 2020). This will cause more and more people to lose their jobs and livelihoods, which would cause a ripple effect on a country's economy and wellbeing, which creates a vicious cycle of more significant problems.

Everywhere, new norms are being enforced where most importantly, the calls for social distancing are getting louder that even the Prime Minister of Malaysia decided to launch the "Embracing New Norms" campaign to increase awareness and to empower Malaysian always to keep their families and themselves protected and healthy (Shah, 2020). Companies are now required to strictly follow new guidelines that the Malaysian Government has set if they wish to resume operations at their office, which include mandatory temperature checks for all employees, having a foot-operated door, rearrangement of the workplace, and even having social distancing markers everywhere to name a few (Dayangku, 2020). All these measures are undoubtedly costly to carry out when expenditure is tight, which further strengthens the idea of WFH to be a brilliant one as it would save the company tons of money and reduce the risk of contracting the virus significantly as well.

1.2 Research Objectives

The main objective of this research is to look at how working from home could affect an employee's productivity in current times. The self-determination theory will be extensively used to relate both the independent variables and dependent variables.

RO1: To determine whether Competence has a significant effect on employee productivity if they work from home

RO2: To determine if Autonomy plays a major role in maintaining employee productivity if they work from home.

RO3: To determine in case relatedness displays a correlation between employee productivity and them working from home.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The IT industry would be very keen to study this research as it would show them how working from home in the future would be and how they can transition from their traditional methods of doing business to a more updated one. The IT industry also wants to see their employees posting the same or improved productivity levels and showing them how it would benefit the industry financially. For governments, this research would be helpful, where it gives them new insights into how they can implement new laws that help further be eco-friendly while still having the economy be stable throughout. The use of electricity, water, and building space would ensure that the governments can further strengthen their environmental consciousness stand, benefiting the long run.

1.4 Limitation of the Study

This research only covered the Malaysian service. This was because different industries may have different driving factors of productivity. The second limitation was that the more prominent corporations were reluctant to allow their employees to participate in the questionnaire since they prioritize their employee's data privacy and confidentiality. The third limitation was the method used to conduct the study as the quantitative research method over the qualitative method. The data collected may not be an accurate representation of the population. Distributing the questionnaires was also a limitation. It was challenging to get in touch with several companies since the Movement Control Order (MCO) made companies challenging.

2. Literature Review

Working from home comes in several different variations. That includes doing it voluntarily, by the employer's request, full-time or part-time arrangements, or just formally and informally. Working from home can be done in multiple ways because of the current technological age we live in. Several different terms working from home also go by, including telecommuting, teleworking, home-based working, and even remote working (Buffton, 2020). People who decide to work from home also experience a personal benefit, which is a significant drop in stress levels in a day (Gregory, 2019). Working from home allows a person to better grasp their stress levels compared to working in

an office. If things are getting a little too overwhelming at home, they can take breaks or walk away when they need to relax. One of the biggest reasons people work from home is its work-life balance benefit (Mai, 2020). As with anything, there are always certain disadvantages associated with WFH and the benefits. One of the more obvious disadvantages to this arrangement is technical, zero human interaction (Mai, 2020). Lenovo did the research recently showed that 77% of employees globally believe that their employer's perspective of working from home will drastically be shifted during this phase and may see in more companies allowing their employees to WFH when everything goes back to normal (Bots, 2020).

The work-from-home arrangement has been around for quite a while but has not seen it become a norm in the industry. It is hard to find why it is not being welcomed in many organizations with the many benefits it may possess. A study was undertaken back in 2014 that looked at a company, Ctrip, a Chinese travel website, that allowed its staff to volunteer for a work-from-home stint. The study then split the two groups up, where one group continued working from the office while the other worked from home. At the end of nine months, the researchers found that the employees who worked from home were less likely to quit their jobs and were much happier and more productive than their office working counterparts (Bloom, 2014). Therefore, more companies have not made working from home a standard policy that is being widely asked today. According to Bloom, Liang, Roberts, and Ying (2014), who conducted a study based upon a Chinese travel agency that was NASDAQ listed, the results were astounding. Comparing the traditional method of working in the office and working from home, the 16,000-employee company saw a considerable increase in productivity from the employees who worked from home. A 13% performance increase was observed compared to the group that was working in the office. Bosua, Gloet, Kurnia, Mendoza, and Yong (2013) undertook research based upon the interview data collection method. These authors took the perspectives of both employers and employees from six different medium to large organizations consisting of public and private industry sectors, found that telework or working from home for a few alternate days a week to be positive, productivity-wise.

2.1 Research Framework

Three basic needs of humans:

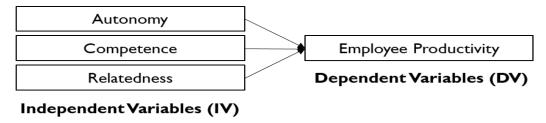


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

Using self-determination theory (SDT), the research focuses on three basic needs of humans: Autonomy, which was used to see if employees feel motivated in a situation where they have control of their own lives. The second would be Competence, where the tasks' mastery level makes them feel motivated to carry on. Thirdly, Relatedness examines how a sense of belonging would help motivate them. Self-determination looks at how a person makes their choices and can manage the things around them. This theory, if well practiced, allows people to gain control over their own life choices. It also plays an essential role in building up their motivation as they feel much more obliged to do things they choose to do on their own (Cherry, 2019). These three basic needs, Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness, also known as Independent Variables (IV), will then be tested in Correlation with employee productivity which will act as the Dependent Variable (DV) for this study.

2.2 Hypothesis

H1: Competence has a significant effect on employee productivity if they work from home.

H2: Autonomy plays a major role in maintaining employee productivity if they work from home.

H3: Relatedness displays a correlation between employee productivity and them working from home.

3.Materials and Methods

The current research looks to stipulate the many different ways that the data analysis would analyze the data while explaining why they are done to strengthen the research and data collection methods further. The research focus here would be to see if the variables of SDT would influence productivity while WFH in the service industry in Malaysia. For this research, a descriptive research design approach was taken to conduct the research. This research design method describes situations, populations, or phenomena systematically and accurately (McCombes, 2019).

3.1 Instrumentation

The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part consists of the respondent's demographic profile. The second part encompassed questions regarding the three independent variables and the dependent variable, divided into Section 2: The Effectiveness of Autonomy, Section 3: The Effectiveness of Competence, Section 4: The Effectiveness of Relatedness, and Section 5: Productivity when working from home. A questionnaire was chosen as the measuring instrument because it is a format that people are employed. It does not take up much of their time, and the data is standardized across the board, making it easy and straightforward to analyze.

3.2 Population, Unit of Analysis, Sample Selection and Sampling Techniques

The study population was a group of employees in the service industry in Malaysia. The respondents were selected based on work from the office before the MCO and home once MCO began. Convenience sampling seemed to be the convenient way to conduct the study. The questionnaire was distributed through electronic means, namely through email, to several organizations that fall under the service industry umbrella. A reliability test was performed on each variable and all its items which were included in the questionnaire. The validity test was performed to make sure that the questionnaire constructed is valid. To test the hypotheses of the study, Pearson Correlation was conducted. Multiple Linear Regression was employed to determine the relationship that a dependent variable has with two or more independent variables.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis Methods

Data collection was carried out using a constructed questionnaire with questions regarding the three basic needs of humans and productivity while WFH was asked. The questionnaire was distributed through electronic means, namely through email to several. The questionnaire was done using Google Forms, while the data was downloaded in Excel format once all 100 responses were gathered. The need to review and omit any incomplete data will not be needed as all questions in the questionnaire will be made mandatory to be answered, eliminating incomplete questionnaires. Once that is done, the data analysis will be done using IBM's Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software to decipher the raw data into a much more understandable format.

3.4 Pearson Correlation

Pearson correlation coefficient, known as Pearson R, is used to look at two variables and measure the strength of their linear association, which is given R's value (Magiya, 2019). In more

layman terms, it tries to determine how strong or weak the relationship between two given variables is-see figure 2 below.

$$\mathbf{r} = \frac{\mathbf{n}(\Sigma \mathbf{x}\mathbf{y}) - (\Sigma \mathbf{x})(\Sigma \mathbf{y})}{\sqrt{\left[\mathbf{n}\Sigma \mathbf{x}^2 - (\Sigma \mathbf{x})^2\right]\left[\mathbf{n}\Sigma \mathbf{y}^2 - (\Sigma \mathbf{y})^2\right]}}$$
(1)

Figure 2: Formula for Pearson Correlation (Glen, 2017).

3.5 Multiple Linear Regression

Multiple linear regression describes the relationship between a continuous dependent variable and two or more independent variables (Bangdiwala, 2020). The formula that was used to compute the Multiple Linear Regression is shown in figure 3 below:

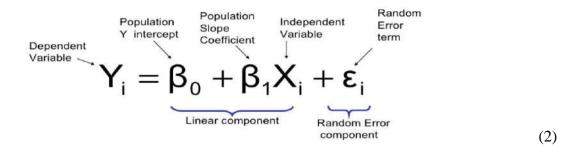


Figure 3: Formula for Multiple Linear Regression (Mawardi, 2017).

4. Results and Discussion

The data that has been collected from Malaysians who are working in the service industry are analyzed. Microsoft Excel was used to organize and group the collected data locally, and IBM's SPSS software is used to analyze the data thoroughly. For this research, several different tests have been identified to be performed on the data, namely five: descriptive analysis, reliability test, factor analysis, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression test. The questionnaire for this research was done through the use of Google Forms and was distributed electronically online. The respondents were chosen based on the convenience non-probability sampling method.

4.1 Reliability Test

Table 1: Reliability Test

| Variable | Number of | Cronbach's Alpha |
|----------|-----------|------------------|
| | Items | |

| Productivity when WFH | 7 | 0.748 |
|-----------------------|---|-------|
| Autonomy | 5 | 0.869 |
| Competence | 5 | 0.880 |
| Relatedness | 5 | 0.815 |

(Source: Author's SPSS Analysis)

In Table 1, Cronbach's alpha values for all four variables are significantly higher than 0.6, ranging from 0.748 up to 0.880. and they are deemed acceptable, and all further analysis of the data using the variables are permitted.

4.2 Pearson Correlation

Table 2: Pearson Correlation

| | | Productivity when WFH (DV) |
|-------------|---------------------|----------------------------|
| Autonomy | Pearson Correlation | 0.676 ** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.000 |
| | N | 100 |
| Competence | Pearson Correlation | 0.677 ** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.000 |
| | N | 100 |
| Relatedness | Pearson Correlation | 0.545 ** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.000 |
| | N | 100 |

^{**} Correlation is significant at the 0.01 significant level (2-tailed)

(Source: Author's SPSS Analysis)

All the three IVs are above 0.5, and it is worth noting that among the three independent variables, Competence has the strongest Correlation with productivity when WFH. Autonomy has the second strongest Correlation with productivity when WFH at 0.676, and finally, Relatedness, which has the lowest Correlation among all three variables with productivity when WFH is only at 0.545. To conclude, there is a significant correlation between all three independent variables and the dependent variable.

4.3 Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

Table 3: *Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)*

| Model | | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|-------|------------|----------------|----|-------------|--------|-------------|
| 1 | Regression | 9.680 | 3 | 3.227 | 34.782 | 0.000^{b} |
| | Residual | 8.906 | 96 | 0.093 | | |
| | Total | 18.587 | 99 | | | |

- a. Dependent Variable: Productivity when WFH
- b. Predictors: (Constant), Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness

(Source: Author's SPSS Analysis)

Referring to table 3, the F-value of the study as displayed is 34.782, while its significant value stands at 0.000. It can be concluded then that the relationship between the three independent variables and productivity while WFH is significant since the significant value is 0.000.

4.4 Regression Coefficients

Table 4: Summary of Regression Coefficients

| | Model | Unstandardized | | Standardized | t | Sig. |
|---|-------------|----------------|------------|--------------|-------|-------|
| | | Coefficients | | Coefficients | | |
| | | β | Std. Error | Beta | | |
| 1 | (Constant) | 1.837 | 0.229 | | 8.007 | 0.000 |
| | Autonomy | 0.263 | 0.075 | 0.384 | 3.520 | 0.001 |
| | Competence | 0.254 | 0.103 | 0.361 | 2.463 | 0.016 |
| | Relatedness | 0.022 | 0.084 | 0.031 | 0.266 | 0.791 |

a. Dependent Variable: Productivity when WFH

(Source: Author's SPSS Analysis)

In table 4, the largest beta coefficient is 0.384, which belongs to Autonomy which means it has the strongest unique contribution to explaining productivity when WFH. The beta value for competence was slightly lower, meaning it contributed a little less than Autonomy. Focusing on the Sig. value for Autonomy, which is 0.001, Competence, 0.016 and Relatedness, 0.791, the only Relatedness managed to be above 0.05, meaning it did not have a significant relationship with productivity when WFH. Therefore, only hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 2 are accepted, whereas hypothesis 3 is rejected since it has a significant value above 0.791.

5. Conclusion

Both Competence (RO1) and Autonomy (RO2) influence productivity while WFH in Malaysia's service industry. Relatedness (RO3) did not influence productivity in the service in

Malaysia. Two out of the three independent variables show a significant correlation with the dependent variable, and only hypotheses 1 and 2 have been accepted. Hypothesis 3 has been rejected since Relatedness does not display a significant correlation with the dependent variable. Competence and productivity have a positive correlation of 0.254. It also shows that Competence has a significant effect on employee productivity when WFH has a p-value of 0.001, which is lower than 0.05. *Hypothesis 1* is accepted. Autonomy has the most significant influence on productivity when WFH has the highest positive Correlation of all the three independent variables at 0.263. It also shows that Autonomy significantly affects employee productivity when WFH has a p-value of 0.016, which is lower than 0.05. *Hypothesis 2* is accepted. Relatedness and productivity have a positive correlation of 0.022. It also shows that Relatedness does not significantly affect employee productivity when WFH has a p-value of 0.791, which is higher than 0.05. *Hypothesis 3* is rejected. Autonomy seems to have the most influence on productivity while WFH in the service industry in Malaysia as compared to competence. This research study concluded that only Autonomy and Competence significantly influence productivity while WFH in the service industry in Malaysia. It means that the research objectives of this study have been achieved.

Companies and their management will have a broader insight and a more transparent comprehension of the influences that drive productivity when their employees are WFH. It helps them see how WFH in the most ideal situations hikes up productivity than when their employees work from the office. In today's modern era, where connectivity is at an individual's fingertips, WFH does not seem much of a hassle than maybe 20 years ago when it was just the beginning of the 21st century. WFH as a norm should not be put aside as the benefits it provides to all parties including, the company, management, and its employees, are transparent. Companies and the management are highly recommended to allocate more resources to satisfy their employee's need for Autonomy. It has a strong influence on productivity if they decide to make WFH a viable norm. Autonomy is the need for people to feel that they control their own behaviors and goals. When a company and its management successfully fulfill the need for Autonomy, it makes their employees work much more efficiently than before as they realize they are in control of what they do and how they do it. Autonomy is the most important psychological need that has to be fulfilled to drive productivity further when WFH. companies and their management should also pay attention to another psychological need of their employees, which is Competence. It also shows that it plays a significant role in their productivity when WFH. Competence is classed as a need where people are much more effective in a specific environment. People tend to feel that they are much more competent and motivated in their own comfort space, which again shows that WFH looks to be an arrangement that employers should not just shrug off. Employees feel that they can master their tasks and learn new things while being in an environment that is much more accommodating. Competence as a psychological need should be fulfilled to see strong productivity levels while WFH. Companies in the service industry in Malaysia and their management should start looking to the future and start implementing WFH arrangements for all their employee that choose the option. Yes, there may be some who still would prefer to come into the office every day. That is totally fine. Again, productivity is influenced by Autonomy and the ability of people to control their own choices. Being in the service industry, it is straightforward, especially in times such as these, namely the Covid-19 pandemic and having to be subjected to the MCO; WFH is an option that does not disrupt workflow, as the business can go on as usual, with the only difference being that, is done from the comfort of home. There is no denying that whatever downsides there may be, all the benefits to every party involved ultimately outweighs them, and WFH should be the subsequent new norm.

It is recommended that future research use both quantitative and qualitative methods, hand in hand, to perform much more thorough research. This is because quantitative research, as comprehensive as it may be, is pretty shallow and abstract as it generalizes the population. In contrast, qualitative research searching for rich data relies on a minimal number of cases representing a population (Buchanan, 1992). Osbaldeston (2018) believes that using a combination of both quantitative and qualitative research to enhance the research results further is a much more solid option. Since qualitative research takes up much more time than quantitative, it is also recommended that future research span out for a longer period. In the future, a similar study should be conducted in other industries besides the service industry. This would be able to give an insight into what drives productivity. At the same time, WFH in other Building upon that, future research is also recommended to put forward different models and theories to prove that WFH is the way to go in the future. This is since the current research still has an unexplained variance of 47.9%, which means that different variables that are not present in this study can interpret it further. Worth noting is that the R Square value can only increase by incorporating variables suitable to the research. Since this study, the hypothesis concerning Relatedness was not accepted since it did not display any significance to productivity when WFH, it would be recommended that the questions asked for Relatedness be structured differently and may be formatted differently. If this is done correctly, there would be a possibility to show that even Relatedness does play a significant role in influencing productivity when WFH.

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